Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 10 | Issue 1 Article 12

1-1-1993

# Martin, ATHEISM: A PHILOSOPHICAL JUSTIFICATION

Jamess A. Keller

## NOTES

1. In a note (p. 86) Stump promises an essay which addresses "issues involving the mechanisms of God's providence."

2. For a contrary view of the Lewis-Anscombe exchange, see Victor Reppert, "The Lewis-Anscombe Controversy: A Discussion of the Issues," *Christian Scholar's Review* XIX:1 (September 1989), pp. 32-48.

3. The essays cited are Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God" and Wolterstorff's "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?"; both are contained in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

4. One might, more charitably, interpret Plantinga as holding that in the case of believers the noetic effects of sin, while present, are counteracted by divine grace sufficiently to permit our innate noetic dispositions to function more or less normally.

5. Westphal does, it is true, allow for exceptions in the case of "existentially peripheral" beliefs such as those of mathematics. But it is hard to see how this can help; Westphal clearly rejects the foundationalist strategy of basing our metaphysical and religious beliefs on those other, less contaminated, areas of knowledge.

6. "The man who wishes to believe in God as his God must realize that he has nothing in his hand on which to base his faith. He is suspended in mid-air, and cannot demand a proof of the Word which addresses him. For the ground and object of faith are identical. Security can be found only by abandoning all security, by being ready, as Luther put it, to plunge into the inner darkness" ("Bultmann Replies To His Critics," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 211).

7. Westphal writes, "Perhaps the notion of Christian philosophy makes sense after all, not in terms of its propositional what but in terms of its prayerful how" (p. 220). A fine sentiment, but oddly placed at the end of ten pages spent criticizing his fellow Christian philosophers for accepting epistemological propositions which are not in accord with Christian doctrine.

8. Thomas V. Morris, ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

*Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, by **Michael Martin**. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990. Pp. xiii and 533.

JAMES A. KELLER, Wofford College.

Michael Martin's purpose, as his subtitle suggests, is to present a comprehensive philosophical justification for atheism. He realizes that this has been attempted before, but he believes that the case for atheism must be restated in light of certain recent developments, including the appearance of some new arguments for theism and revised statements of old arguments, as well as new replies to arguments against the existence of God. Martin wants to respond to the most important of these. His book and all of the literature to which he refers are solidly within the analytic tradition of the philosophy of religion.

Though he is aware that people have had a variety of ideas of God, Martin confines his efforts "to showing the irrationality of belief in the existence of the Hebrew-Christian God, a personal being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and completely good and who created heaven and earth" (p. 24). His book has two major parts: an argument for "negative atheism" (disbelief in the existence of God) and an argument for "positive atheism" (belief in the non-existence of God). The former argument itself has two parts: an argument that language about God is meaningless; and, in case this is not conclusive, an attempted rebuttal of all of the arguments for the existence of God. The argument for positive atheism includes an argument that the concept of God is incoherent, what Martin terms "atheistic teleological arguments," and an extensive treatment of the argument from evil and various theistic responses.

Thus he includes all the major traditional issues in his book. The result, though comprehensive, also has a perplexing implication: if Martin is correct in his argument that language about God is meaningless, then the rest of his book is meaningless as well—not just pointless (for he would already have established that negative atheism is correct), but meaningless (for it is replete with language about God). So it is difficult to avoid wondering whether Martin himself believes that the argument is correct. If he does, then what does he think he is doing in the remaining 80% of the book; if he does not, why include it? Certainly some atheists think it is correct, but one wonders what Martin thinks. This is only the most obvious example of a pervasive feature of the book: Martin's reluctance to indicate to the reader any judgment about the relative success of various arguments he gives and about which ones he personally accepts. Thus, though his book compiles many arguments against theism, it gives the reader little indication of what positions other than atheism Martin advocates.

Martin's reluctance to indicate more completely other beliefs which he accepts complicates significantly the assessment of his argument. The belief that God exists (or that God does not exist) is only one component which is found in many different belief-systems, and it is difficult to give a fair assessment of this component apart from some total belief-system of which it is a part.[1] Even the rebuttal of an argument is based on some beliefs; unless these beliefs are true, one has not rebutted the argument but only sketched a possible rebuttal to it;[2] and many of Martin's rebuttals are themselves based on controversial beliefs.[3] Since the justifiedness of a person's holding a belief depends on other beliefs he holds (as well as on other grounds he might have), the evaluation of the relative strengths of theism and atheism should be done in relation to particular belief-systems. Thus one way for Martin to improve the assessibility of his argument would be to compare one overall view which includes atheism with one overall view which includes theism. Of course, a book which did this would not be, even in purpose, a comprehensive case

against theism, but the reflections in this paragraph suggest that such a case cannot be made in a way which permits its fair assessment.

Martin discusses a genuinely impressive range of materials in the book. He analyzes and evaluates an immense array of arguments by many different thinkers. He has indeed responded to most of the important developments in analytic philosophy of religion in the decade prior to his book as well as to important literature from earlier in this century. With very few exceptions (e.g., Anselm's version of the ontological arguments), he refrains from discussing pre-twentieth-century material because he believes that later formulations have refined and strengthened the arguments in earlier formulations. I think his judgment about what material to discuss is generally good, though there are some omissions I find surprising: William Alston's work on the justification of religious belief and on "Christian practice"; the common distinction among foundationalists between being justified and showing that one is justified; William Hasker's work on "gratuitous evil"; and process discussions of the problem of evil.[4] (Of course, some disagreement is almost inevitable when different people have to decide what material to include.) Despite these few disagreements, I believe that his discussion of each topic generally raises important issues and provides a useful guide to important literature.

Virtually every argument which Martin discusses has been dealt with in more detail elsewhere in the literature, in articles or books devoted to just that detail. However, his concern is not to outdo everyone else's discussion of all the details or even of just certain details, but rather to survey all the arguments which support atheism and to present them comprehensively. Though I was often unconvinced by his arguments, I often also found myself thinking that I could understand why someone would find them convincing, either by themselves or as part of an overall position. However, given the great number of arguments which he discusses, it seems to me pointless in this review to criticize this or that detail of his arguments. Instead I want to call attention to the following pervasive features of his book: (1) the failure to consider the role of religious beliefs as (only) a part of religious faith;[5] (2) the failure to distinguish (in Plantinga's terms) the question of the justifiedness of religious beliefs from the question of their warrant; (3) the apparent assumption that the evaluation of theistic beliefs is to be made from a neutral standpoint on the basis of agreed-upon evidence (though he never explicitly states that he makes this assumption); and (4) the frequent use, as part of his rebuttal of arguments for the existence of God, of the claim that the argument, even if successful, would prove only that some supernatural being exists, not necessarily the omnipotent, omniscient, all-good Creator of the universe with which his book is concerned. I shall comment on the first two and only allude to the others.

(1) Few people, if any, come to religious faith by first becoming convinced that certain theistic beliefs are true and then casting about for some form of

religious faith which incorporates those beliefs. (I suspect that few people, if any, become atheists in an analogous way.[6]) Rather, people have a faith-commitment, perhaps made in childhood, or make one as adults. Such a commitment in the Judeo-Christian tradition is to what the person of faith believes to be God; this faith-commitment is interpreted, given structure, and expressed in terms of certain beliefs, including beliefs about God, which provide what may be termed the theory-component of religious faith. The faith-commitment centers on commitment to a Person and also includes a commitment to behave in certain ways, to participate in certain activities, to accept certain other people or books or experiences as authoritative, etc. In short, it is a commitment to a whole way of life. The importance of each of the various components in this way of life varies from person to person, but every person of faith judges the whole commitment, not just its theory-component, adequate or inadequate. Of course, finding serious difficulties with part or all of its theory-component may be an important reason for finding the whole commitment inadequate, but there are often ways to deal with these difficulties other than abandoning the whole commitment. I shall note some of them below.

If a person is engaged in a way of life which she regards as adequate and if that way of life includes certain beliefs as its theory-component, then she will be justified in holding those beliefs unless she has very strong reasons against them. Even if alternative beliefs (e.g., a slightly different conception of God or of supernatural beings) might structure, interpret, and express an otherwise very similar or even identical way of life, the person of faith is not unjustified in holding the traditional beliefs. Consider that in science the fact that it is possible that there are alternative theories which also explain a given body of data is no reason to stop using or to doubt the current theory. A scientist would not be unjustified in omitting a search for or consideration of alternative theories until their fruitfulness has become evident or until serious difficulties have appeared in his own; in the latter case, he would also be justified in attempting small modifications in his theory rather than searching for or adopting a radically different one. Analogously in religious faith, though there may be many other possible theory-components supportive of a faith-commitment which is in other ways similar to that made by some person, before that person gives serious consideration to any alternative, it must be developed in some detail and she must have good reason to think her own theory-component is seriously flawed. Similarly, a non-theist who is considering a way of life informed by some theistic beliefs would not be unjustified in committing to one way without considering all possible theistic belief-systems; he is surely justified in considering only those informing ways of life which have some initial appeal to him. After all, he has only so much time and energy.

My claim that it is the entire faith-commitment and not just the theory-component whose adequacy is most important for people of faith is not meant to imply the thesis that various alleged benefits of having religious faith are to be used to decide the issue of whether to believe certain religious doctrines when strictly intellectual grounds are insufficient. (Martin discusses precisely this thesis in Chapter 9.) This thesis is an implication a person might draw from my claim if he believes that there is some neutral standpoint from which to assess the evidence and the alleged benefits. But people do not occupy such a standpoint. Instead they already are living by some faith-commitment. (At least religious people are; I think atheists are too, but I shall not argue that point here.) The benefits and liabilities of that commitment are not abstract possibilities but concrete realities, compared with which the benefits and liabilities of some other faith-commitment are only abstract possibilities. The issue confronting a person, therefore, is whether her present commitment, including its theory-component, is so unsatisfactory as to make worthwhile the risk of undertaking a new commitment. If the overall life she has with that commitment is satisfactory and if the intellectual difficulty is merely a problem, even if severe, with one or two beliefs, she would hardly be unjustified in attempting to modify one or another of the beliefs rather than taking the risk of committing herself to a very different faith.

People of faith do often adopt this tactic when dealing with a difficulty in their beliefs. For example, even some relatively conservative Christians have recently argued that Christians should not claim that God's knowledge includes the future free actions of free agents, for such actions cannot be foreknown. But they have not thought of themselves as abandoning their faith or even ceasing to be theists when they made this claim. Martin might maintain that they are no longer theists, given his definition of theism, but that would not make them any less people of faith in God or any less believers that God exists. This suggests that the range of beliefs about God which are consonant with Christian faith (and, I would suggest, with other faiths as well) is broader than Martin's definition allows. Of course, taking account of this range would greatly complicate Martin's book, and perhaps he would be content to have argued for the non-existence of any being satisfying his definition of God. But in that case, many religious believers who call themselves theists would agree with his conclusion, thus limiting the value of his argument.

(2) In discussing a person of faith's response to difficulties in his beliefs, I used the term *justified* (and cognates). By it I meant that the person is not guilty of any intellectual faults, that he had not failed any intellectual duties. But this is not necessarily to say that he has strong warrant for his beliefs, where warrant is what is required to raise true belief to knowledge. Underlying this distinction is the conviction that different people may be *justified*

in holding contradictory beliefs—i.e., they may do so without either's being guilty of an intellectual fault. They may do so because whether a person has committed an intellectual fault depends on many factors, including the evidence and other sorts of grounds available to him, the time he has to investigate the beliefs he holds, and his intellectual abilities.[7] Therefore, a much stronger case, and probably one which employs different grounds, is needed to show that a religious believer is unjustified in his religious beliefs than is needed to show that a person committed to some atheistic way of life is justified in his atheistic beliefs. But to say that each may be justified is not necessarily to say that either has strong warrant for his beliefs.

Since Martin does not mention or use the distinction between justifiedness and warrant, it is not clear which of these his arguments are concerned with. However, I suspect that it is the latter. That is, I believe that he would claim that not believing that God exists and believing that God does not exist are both warranted. But this raises the question of what the reasons are which warrant this conclusion. Does everyone have those reasons, or are they at least available to everyone? Is there some neutral standpoint from which to assess the relative strength of the reasons for and against various beliefs about God? Can reasons be assessed apart from other beliefs to which they are related by conceptual and evidential links? Of course, negative answers to questions like these would make it all the more difficult to construct a comprehensive case for atheism (or for theism for that matter). But these questions must be faced.

I want to guard against a possible misunderstanding of what I have said so far. My stress that beliefs about God are only part of the theory-component of religious faith is not meant to imply that only believers can assess those beliefs. (I do not wish to imply some sort of Wittgensteinian fideism.) But it is meant to imply that the assessment of such beliefs by outsiders will be difficult. (I think this is true of the assessment of all types of theories, not just of religious beliefs.) Attention must be paid to the other beliefs held by persons of faith and to the sorts of grounds which they have or allege for their beliefs. For instance, people who believe that the world could exist only if it was created by God might have different ideas about what sorts of world are possible than do people who believe that the world does not depend on a Creator. Other examples can be derived from Martin's discussion of Hartshorne's ontological argument (pp. 88-91). Martin contends that (i) there is nothing about the concept of an island that would require that an island be contingent and (ii) an omnipotent, omniscient Creator might have created sentient beings only to have something to torture. Obviously Hartshorne would disagree with Martin on what is included in the concept of an island; less obviously, Hartshorne would find Martin's idea of a sadistic Creator incoherent in light of what (Hartshorne holds) is involved in perfect knowledge. None of these examples are intended to show that Martin's particular claims are wrong; they

are intended only to remind us what is involved in assessing someone else's argument. The complexities involved in doing justice to another's argument make it very difficult to deal comprehensively with many different arguments by very different philosophers in a book of manageable length.

In closing I want to point out the implications of my comments for the overall assessment of Martin's book. It is far more difficult to construct an overall case for atheism (or for theism) than Martin acknowledges. People's different understandings of what God is like and differences among the other beliefs which people hold make it difficult to show that the theistic beliefs in the theory-components of faith are never justified. The difficulty is increased by the fact that people hold the theory-component as part of a faith-commitment which is itself justified by its overall contribution to the person's life. Therefore, there seems little value in attempting a comprehensive case for atheism (or for theism), as opposed to a detailed exploration of one argument or to critiques of a well-defined overall position. Consequently, I believe that the primary value of Martin's book lies in his discussion of each topic. These discussions contain helpful summaries of issues, often raise interesting and worthwhile points, and include valuable bibliographical material in the notes. But it is unlikely that any book which is as general as his tries to be will, or even should, convince any person with a theistic faith that the intellectual problems are so great and so insoluble that she should give up her theistic beliefs. The book as a whole does present a good case that atheism is not necessarily unjustified—i.e., that an atheist is not necessarily guilty of any egregious intellectual faults. But I think that most theists would already agree on that point. However, the book hardly shows that the case for either positive or negative atheism is so strong that every intellectually honest person should hold either belief.

Incidentally, the reader should also be warned that there are several potentially misleading errors in the book—i.e., not just misspellings (of which I noted only one), but points in the argument where a crucial word like *not* has been omitted or wrongly inserted, or where a reference to a numbered point (or a subscript) is wrongly numbered. I counted nineteen such occurrences—at least if I followed Martin's argument at these points.

## NOTES

1. His failure to consider a belief about God as part of a total belief-system has some odd results. For instance, he defines omniscience to include all knowledge by acquaintance and all know-how, as well as all knowledge of true propositions and no false beliefs (p. 288). Then he argues that there are incoherences in this concept of omniscience. However, virtually no person of faith would use this definition. Martin considers any other definition inadequate, but surely the one who believes a theory has the right to specify what theory he believes.

2. Interestingly, he is aware of this when he is criticizing Plantinga's use of Satan as an explanation of natural evil. He admits that this suggestion defeats the deductive problem of evil, but he insists that its success as an answer to the probabilistic argument from evil depends on how probable the theory of Satan is.

3. One particularly clear example of this is Martin's use of Bonjour's criticism of foundationalism as part of his rebuttal of the foundationalism underlying Plantinga's claim that beliefs about God may be properly basic. Unless Martin is willing to specify and defend a non-foundationalist epistemology as part of an overall belief-system which includes atheism, it is difficult to assess how successful his rebuttal of foundationalism is. Many of the other beliefs which Martin uses in his criticism of the arguments of theists are beliefs on which theists and atheists might well disagree, making all the more difficult the assessment of their strength as reasons for doubting or rejecting some theistic arguments.

4. The omission of Hasker's work is all the more surprising because Martin includes an extended discussion of Rowe's argument from evil, and many of Hasker's papers are in dialogue with Rowe. Perhaps the omission of process discussions of the problem of evil may be explained on the grounds that process theism understands God in a way different from Martin's definition, but he does depart from that definition himself in a brief discussion of a "finite God" theodicy and in a discussion of views of God's knowledge which deny that God knows the future actions of free agents.

5. He seems to consider faith a form of intellectual assent, either justified by the evidence (Aquinas) or going radically beyond or even against the evidence (Kierkegaard). He uses the phrase "belief in God" to refer to having faith in God and to believing that God exists, as though there were little or no difference between the two.

6. In his "Preface" Martin tells of the influence which childhood conversations with his atheistic step-grandfather had on his becoming an atheist.

7. Martin acknowledges this in one footnote (n. 8 on p. 484), but he does not draw from it the implications which I do in my review.

Divine, Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer, edited by **Brian Hebblethwaite** and **Edward Henderson**. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990. Pp. 281. Cloth.

CHARLES TALIAFERRO, St. Olaf College.

It is fitting that Austin Farrer's work should inspire philosophical theology. Austin Farrer (1904-1968), an Anglican priest and Oxford academic, was a philosophical theologian of a high order. The present volume is not a commentary on Farrer's work, but a collection of papers which variously employ Farrer's understanding of Divine agency as a point of departure in developing independent positions in the philosophy of God. Contributors discuss creation, the miraculous, double agency (God's action through human action), the place of narrative in understanding Divine activity, epistemic conditions for recognizing God's action, and the implications of our beliefs about God's